

[EXTRACT]

## Is it safer to avoid US chain hotels?

***Western-owned hotel chains are a target for militant Islamist attacks, but they provide far better protection than smaller hotels***

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The bomb attacks at the Ritz Carlton and Marriott hotels in the Mega Kuningan district of Jakarta on 17 July will inevitably raise fears among business travellers about the safety of staying in Western hotel chains and American-owned chains in particular.

In an era of increased terrorist activity, Western-owned hotels are a natural target. Hotels are, by their very nature, open. They need to allow guests to come and go as they please 24 hours a day. Putting security checkpoints in the way of that unfettered access makes them less appealing.

Potential terrorists also have easier access to such hotels in their own countries rather than in the countries they are targeting. Attacks also serve to pressure their own governments by driving away Western investment and jeopardizing economic growth in the country.

American chains are an irresistible target. They are as potent a symbol of America as McDonalds, despite many of them these days being owned by local investors rather than the chain itself.

Marriott is the hardest hit of all the US chains over the years. The Jakarta hotel was also targeted by a car bomber in 2003, killing 12 and injuring 150. A vehicle bomb attack on the group's Islamabad property in 2008 saw 54 die.

Speaking on his blog, the group's boss Bill Marriott Jr, said: "In recognition of the unfortunate realities in which we live, we have had rigorous security procedures in place at these hotels and others around the world. I want to personally assure you that the safety and security of our guests and associates has been, and will always be, one of our highest priorities."

Yet Marriott is not the only chain to come under attack. Ritz Carlton and Hilton have also been targets for terrorists.

So should business travellers avoid these hotels when travelling?

Red24 is a consultancy which advises companies on travel security. The company's head of corporate intelligence, Lee Niblett, believes that Western-owned chain hotels offer better security than independent hotels.

He says: "They have qualified security staff, practised and refined contingency and evacuation plans, better fire safety arrangements and are built to a good specification. They tend to offer business visitors and tourists better protection from criminals and from other assorted threats such as fires and natural disasters."

He adds that while hotels are often high profile targets, terrorists also recognise the opportunity and symbolism of other targets

"For example, although the Marriott in Jakarta was targeted by a suicide-delivered VBIED [vehicle bomb] in 2003, militant Islamists in Indonesia have also targeted the Australian Embassy (2004), nightclubs in Bali (2002) and restaurants and a beach in Bali (2005)," he says. "Although the Marriott in Islamabad has also been targeted, militant Islamists have also attacked the Pearl Continental, the Sri Lankan cricket team and a variety of governmental and military targets in Pakistan."

In the November 2008 Mumbai attacks, it was Indian-owned Oberoi and Taj hotels which were the targets.

Niblett concludes: "In essence, militant Islamist attacks are driven by opportunity and as such, any Western-owed hotel chain or hotel populated by foreign nationals is at threat in high-risk countries. However, whilst multinational five-star chains are at a potentially heightened risk, they ordinarily provide far better protection, both from terrorism and more ordinary threats such as criminality and natural disasters."

As a result, he says, the company is not advising its corporate clients to avoid high-profile Western-owed hotel chains.

"However, we do advise individuals and companies to be aware of the nature and scale of terrorism threat in the countries they intend to visit or operate in; that they implement robust security measures in high risk environments; and have robust contingency plans in place in the event of a terrorism warning or incident."

One challenge for large companies sending travellers overseas is that they usually do deals with hotel chains for a period of a year or more. In return for getting discounted rates, company travel managers promise the chains a guaranteed number of room nights or a specific percentage share of all their hotel stays.

A company that advises its travellers to avoid a particular chain may have to take a considerable financial hit as a result.

Andrew Solum, a consultant advising companies on their business travel programmes and a regular traveller himself, says: "From the traveller's perspective, I think boycotting two fine hotels means that terrorism works - the terrorists, in addition to getting their message out, actually inflict long-term harm on the hotel chains, and more importantly on the local economy."

In the Jakarta bombings, it appears as if the terrorists were in the hotel as guests. Short of installing X-ray style arrival procedures in hotels, there is little to be done to thwart suicide bombers. So, my advice is to continue to travel, remain vigilant, and don't let the terrorists win."

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Source: Times Online website (22 July 2009)

<http://www.timesonline.co.uk/tol/travel/business/article6722985.ece>